

Smelling the Coffee:
Seven Sins of a Dying Church
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The Missional Church Consultant was deep in prayer, thanking God for the privilege of studying and coming alongside dozens of congregations, helping them to straighten out priorities, strengthen their missionary zeal and operate with healthy organizational structures. He recalled that the average life span of a Christian congregation in the United States is less than 100 years (somewhat longer in rural areas), and he winced at the all-too-frequent tendency of dying congregations to *deny* their own decline and impending death.

He also was deep in prayer because, after months of careful analysis, measurement and interviews, he was convinced that this 78-year-old All Saints congregation was dying. He knew that the congregation leaders could be upset and angry over the specific dysfunctional realities which he had noticed and had imported into his consultation report.

He prayed that God's people would be guided by the Holy Spirit to repent of these observable "sins" of a dying congregation, catch a new vision for what it truly means to be a "faithful and missional" congregation, and commence on an exciting journey of spiritual renewal.

Barnabas-type missional church consultants (like Thom Rainer of LifeWay Christian Resources) are aware of seven "sins" (common characteristics) of congregations that are in precipitous decline and impending death.

1. Doctrinal Dilution -- One dying church conducted a group "Bible Study" on whether or not non-Christians might go to heaven. After much debate, the conclusion was that God would indeed allow people without faith in Christ into heaven. What a terrible tragedy--diluting biblical doctrine in order to make it "easier" for people to unite with the church! By the way, studies indicate that non-Christians are less likely to attend churches with weak doctrinal beliefs than those with strong ones.

2. Loss of Evangelistic Passion -- It is no surprise that dying churches have little passion to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to "lost people." One study indicates that, when the Senior Pastor either lacks or loses passion for reaching the lost, then the saints of those congregations tend to follow suit.

3. Failure to be Relevant -- Many dying churches are "out of touch" with the trends, values and struggles of people in their mission field. Some are functioning like an 8-track cassette in a DVD world! The opposite extreme is noticeable also, as some dying

churches abandon some of the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith in their quest to be relevant.

4. **Few Outwardly-Focused Ministries** -- One study of established congregations in the US found that around 95% of the church's ministries were for the members alone. When churches seek to care and minister only to their own, it can suggest that decline is in motion and death imminent.

5. **Conflict over Personal Preferences** -- Energy and focus for advancing the Kingdom of God can be consumed by conflicts over building programs, church and school rivalry, preferred worship style, color of paint for a room and type of sanctuary carpeting. Personal preference rigidity can turn some churches into a war zone.

6. **The Priority of Comfort** -- Can you imagine someone leaving his car outside the garage for a full year just because the remote door opener has dead batteries? Definitive decline often accelerates as members simply will not move beyond their couches of comfort, rather than expend energy becoming uncomfortable in the world outside the walls of the church.

7. **Biblical Illiteracy** -- Only 3% of US churches have a planned method for instructing their members to learn the Bible in its entirety. Biblical illiteracy can lead churches into disobedience to the Scriptures because people do not know what the Bible says.

Can you identify one or more of these "sins" in your congregation? If that is the case, do not lose hope. Consider inviting a Barnabas-type interventionist (such as your District Mission and Ministry Facilitator, or a consultant team from the Center for United States Missions) into your congregation to help you *smell the coffee* of ministry realities, repent of "decline and death sins," vision and plan for missional advance and be renewed in mission through the Holy Spirit and the Word. ■

Although an interventionist is the best option, a congregation can also:

1. Conduct a church leadership retreat with an outside facilitator
2. Have church leaders do a self-assessment of missional capacity based on *Shaped by God's Heart ~ The Passion and Practices of Missional Churches* by Milfred Minatrea
3. Convene focus groups for reflection on specific aspects of congregational ministry
4. Study Scripture on spiritual warfare
5. Engage in *church revitalization process* (part of the *Ablaze!* Initiative)
6. Study and process the book *Breakout Churches* by Thom Rainer